

New encounters between arts and research

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Abstract

Discussing the work of artists like Patrício Guzman, Rosângela Renó and Teresa Margolles this article addresses the challenges that contemporary history poses for Latin and Central American artists who articulate their engagement by means of experimental expressive specificity. An attempt will be made to redefine the borders between critical research and artistic creation and realization within the proposal of a forensic aesthetics. The article will discuss how a commitment to social and cultural content amplifies the reach of scientific engagement and stimulates its search for a performative impact through enhanced visualization and sensible materiality.

Keywords Science in arts; Forensic paradigm; Post-traumatic perspective; Latin American Art; Contemporary Arts.

In the 2010 documentary – *La Nostalgia de la Luz* (Nostalgia for the Light) – Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzman tells the story of the mothers, sisters and daughters of political opponents who went missing during Pinochet's political dictatorship. In the middle of the Atacama desert, famously known as the driest place on the earth

and one of the main sites for astronomical observation, these women wander around, still looking for the remains of missing relatives dumped there by the dictatorship. One astronomer expresses the analogy between their cosmological search in the attempt to understand the creation of the universe and the forensic desire for the remains of history:

I always observe in my public speaks that I am going to tell people the story of how the calcium of their bones were made. It is the story of the beginning of us, the calcium of my bones were made just after the Big Bang, some of the atoms were there; we live among the trees and we live among the stars, we live along the galaxies, we are a part of the universe. The calcium of my bones was a part of the beginning (Guzman 2010)

It is hard here not to recall Walter Benjamin's considerations, from his book on the German *Trauerspiel*, about allegory as the *Facies Hippocratica* of history now observed as a corpse, as the deadmask of a petrified primordial landscape that is able to tell two stories at once: one about the beginning of everything and another about violence and politics in recent history. It invites an investigation of the death mask of history that might suggest a new beginning, rediscovered in what the remains from the past can tell us. As showed by Susan Buck-Morss (1989), Benjamin distinguished between the "historical nature" expressed in the ruin and the allegory, and tied to a somewhat mythic vision of nature, from the "natural history", expressed in the fossil and the trace in which the petrified nature and life, becomes historical. This idea of a natural history offers a vision of history where the cultural fragments appears as traces of a petrified nature in a phantasmagoric way. The natural historical approach is thus a critical allusion to modernity as "prehistoric, not yet historical in a truly human sense" (1989, 160). But it was also here, in the commodity as reified fetish that Benjamin would see a liberating potential that could be brought back to life by collective political action or by artistic and expressive techniques of montage.

This article will examine a few Latin American artists who have developed in their aesthetic strategies an exposure of the past in its material remains using different scientific techniques to highlight

these objects as if they were traces in a forensic investigation. These artists are committed to presenting the results in a way that will enhance the visibility of knowledge in a broader dimension of representation. The aforementioned example of Patricio Guzman's work is a good place to start. His latest documentary *El Botón de Nácar* is the second installment, following *La Nostalgia de la Luz* in a trilogy on Chile and it examines the relationship between these historical events and the sea. Whereas *La Nostalgia de la Luz* focused on a story about the Atacama desert, its pre-Columbian population, and the military dictatorship embedded in this geographical landscape, *Botón de Nácar* tells the tale of the original population of Patagonia, their violent extermination, and the political prisoners thrown into the Pacific Sea to disappear.

So how is it possible that nature – the desert and the sea – can allegorize, in the sense employed by Benjamin, the human history of Chile? What is the critical achievement of an aesthetic composition in which dramatic and violent historical events, some of them very recent, are seen in parallel to nature as a petrified landscape? In Benjamin's view, allegory as a material object offers mourning through a specific melancholic contemplation, and at the same time, it points to the origin and eludes the potential of a new beginning. This double sidedness of allegory in art and literature is made of time, it is a spatial expression of a dynamic temporal structure which failure is found embedded in the harsh materiality of history as petrified landscape. It is this dynamic structure that will be discussed as a dimension in which certain artists open up the perspective for a critical articulation of academic practice as a performative part of the representation and exhibition of results.

The Universal Archive

Brazilian visual artist Rosângela Rennó has worked with photography her entire career, always from an archival perspective. She prefers to collect photos taken by others and then rework them – amplifying, editing, exposing, exhibiting – often in contrast to citations, texts, or fragments, gathered from newspapers, books, and other sources. During the 1990s different projects were assembled by the artist within the scope of the *Universal Archive*, an archive of archives, a sort of genealogical historical approach to photography as a document of modern media and culture. One project in particular

is worth mentioning in the present perspective: it started as a research in the photographic archive of the *Penitentiary Academy of the State of São Paulo*, where the artist managed to investigate 15.000 glass negatives of black-and-white ID photos of inmates from the first couple of decades of the São Paulo prison history, mainly from the infamous *Casa de Detenção de São Paulo*, built in the 1920s and later known as *Carandiru Jail*, due to its location in the neighborhood of the same name. Rosângela Rennó discovered a collection of over 3.000 negatives of photographs taken with the sole purpose of registering scars, tattoos, and marks caused by diseases on the bodies of inmates, and another series exclusively dedicated to hair-whirls. In the beginning, no one was allowed to touch this now anonymous material, almost completely ignored and in very poor condition. Later it was discovered that some photos had already been published in a scientific treatise on criminology. This made it possible for Rennó to make a deal with the museum, giving her permission to recover, restore and organize the negatives together with FUNARTE, the São Paulo Foundation for the Arts, the University of São Paulo (USP), and the Association of Brazilian Archivists under the condition that the *Academy* would allow her to exhibit the negatives in large amplifications while respecting the anonymity of these inmates. The result was two exhibits, one named *Cicatrizes*, from 1997, and the other *Vulgo*, from 1998, both with a small number of photos in laminated digital prints on black mirrors and large sizes (165X118cm), accompanied by fragments of texts selected from Rennó's collection of clippings gathered from popular newspapers and magazines. These texts talk in a colloquial discourse about images, the disciplinary condition of people, the everyday life, and the passions and tragedies that eventually lie behind these human stories. Rennó's project is not just another critical exposure of the historical alliance between photography and phrenology and similar disciplinary and biopolitical practices; the timing is to be understood as part of the many diversified reactions to a massacre that took place in *Carandiru* during a prison rebellion in October of 1992. A fight broke out after a soccer match and GATE, a special police force under the command of Colonel Ubiratan Guimarães, was called and direct authorization was given by the Governor of São Paulo to enter the prison and control the situation. The result was a bloodbath that caused the death of 111 inmates, many of them shot at close range in

the back while lying in bed. Initially, an inquiry absolved the police of any responsibility, and the officers and soldiers involved were convicted only twenty years after the massacre. In 2002, the prison was imploded, but by then it had already become a symbol through a broad specter of artistic expressions that spans from rap music to literature to film, documentaries, theatre, and other visual and performative arts. It is clear that Rennó works stimulated by what Hal Foster would call an archival impulse (Foster 2010, 3-22), which deals with issues of memory and recollection through the scraps of history that until recently were not part of what was considered relevant or interesting from a museological point of view. Lots of artists have contributed to the increasing interest in this material culture that has been part of the presence of the past in our society. It is also obvious that this specific photographic material is part of a rewriting of modern institutional history that started with Michel Foucault's 1960s groundbreaking studies of disciplinary techniques in modernity. In these images, a clear but silent resistance against the condition of exclusion becomes visible by the exposure of the repressed body stigmatized by disciplinary techniques, such as the writing, in scars and tattoos. It was, however, essential for the success of this project that Rennó managed to collaborate with public and independent institutions, and the way she projected this collective dimension, as well as the combination of art and research and her personal political engagement becomes, in my view, the aesthetic achievement of her work, far beyond its specific content and the success of its exposure. What should be stressed is the way in which she brings material findings into a public forum, visually presenting individual stories and their underlying tragedies in a way that gains universality while simultaneously highlighting the aesthetic, sensitive and performative specificity of the photograph as a material object, renewing the critical edge of the artistic engagement in human right issues.

A forensic paradigm to cultural analysis

From the aforementioned examples it should be noted how insistently violence appears as the underlying substrate to contemporary history. Political violence, repressive and institutional violence, and in a wider perspective also war and criminal, organized or individual violence. We are dealing with a vision and experience of his-

tory often inseparable from the reality of violence. History has become a sort of traumatic and post-traumatic condition that imposes a new epistemology and aesthetics of historical investigation relevant to our present discussion. I refer to what has been called the advent of a forensic paradigm (Keenan and Weizman, 2012), appearing in a distance to the 'era of the witness,' and to the primacy accorded to trauma and memory. Following the argument made by Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan, the forensic epistemology is to be understood as a shift from the focus on subjective testimony, memory and trauma to an emergence of the 'thing,' often human remains, as a new form of evidence and juridical fact that appeals to a scientific exposure to be put into discourse. In their book on the discovery of the remains of escaped Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, in 1985, Weizman and Keenan show how the forensic identification of Mengele's identity, through a revolutionary technique of video exposure that was able to reconstruct his former physical features from his skull and bones, would introduce a new legal and also epistemological paradigm recognized as a means to provide positive evidence of his identity and cause of death. If the Nuremberg process in the aftermath of the Second World War had been based only on *documental* facts and the Eichmann trial in the 60s introduced the *testimonial witness* as the subjective anchor for the juridical process, the reconstruction of Mengele's identity paved the way for a contemporary paradigm of the *forensic evidence* characterized by the way in which object remains can be revealed through a rhetorical exposure by scientists. If witnesses were characterized by traumatic marks in their subjective testimony, forensic evidence is an object in need to be put into words by experts. As such, it inaugurates a new cultural sensibility with political, aesthetical and ethical consequences in the significance of objects, especially human remains, bones, or vestiges able to 'speak' out on what actually happened and to whom. Forensics identify a new condition by which objects become visible and audible as evidence and underline the way in which the juridical fact is constructed and understood. In a forensic sensibility the scope has, in other words, become object-oriented, as part of a 'juridical culture immersed in matter and materialities, in code and form, and in the presentation of scientific investigations by experts.' (Weizman, 2014, 6) As it becomes clear, the forensic epistemology is part of

what has been, on one hand, called the “object turn” (Latour, 2005) as far as it focuses on the materiality found in the *field*; on the other hand the forensic aesthetics refers etymologically to the *forum*, the place for public explanations of material findings. Instead of testimony that privileges the witness experience of the facts, the forensic approach seeks “to make the object speak” as evidence. Obviously, objects cannot speak and the challenge to forensic aesthetics relies exactly in imagining the pertinence of the ancient rhetorical technique of *prosopopoeia* – a figure of speech defined as “personifying a person or object when communicating to an audience” – i.e., speaking on behalf of inanimate objects using contemporary techniques of mapping, diagramming, projections, visualizing, knowledge design, digital exposure, experimental teaching, beautiful data, etc. It is through this focus that the humanities - but also the social and natural sciences - can learn from artistic practice, translating their investigative findings into collaborative and interactive designs. Eyal Weizman explains: “Forensic Aesthetics is the mode of appearance of things in forums – the gesture, techniques, and technologies of demonstration; methods of theatricality, narrative and dramatization; image enhancement and technologies of projection; the creation and demolition of reputation, credibility, and competence.” (Weizman 2012, 10)

A post-traumatic perspective on contemporary history

It could be argued that the importance of this episode is overrated by Weizman and Keenan. Nevertheless, it should be noted how the identification of Mengele’s corpse in Brazil, by Clyde Snow and his international expert team, had an important precedent one year earlier, in 1984, when Snow visited Argentina, invited by the National Commission of the Disappeared (CONADEP). Together with a delegation of forensic scientists, Snow started an important collaboration with the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, gathering evidence for the trial initiated in 1985 against military junta members. Since then, exhumations of clandestine graves in Argentina, Guatemala, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia have become an important tool for local movements in defense of human rights and as evidence in the prosecution of those responsible for these crimes. In a global perspective, the Forensic Architecture project at Goldsmith has shown ample diversity in subject themes and investigative

methodologies that can be consulted in the volume edited for the exhibition *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, organized in Berlin, in 2014, with almost 800 pages of research results on armed conflicts, mass graves in Guatemala and Bosnia, ecological disasters, pollution and poisoning, political crimes, drone attacks, climate issues, trafficking of refugees, and many other political subject matters. Looking at the former and ongoing investigations by Israeli architect Eyal Weizman in the field of architecture, in which he submitted the destruction strategies by Israel in the occupied territory of Gaza to a study of the construction of ruins (Weizman 2007), the *Forensic Architecture* approach shows how military violence, or “the economy of violence intersects with the science of engineering and the shaping of ruins” (Weizman 2012, 13) and becomes an “archeology of the very recent past,” but also “a form of assembling for the future...inventing and constructing the forums yet to come.” (Weizman 2012, 11)

In 1990, Mexican visual artist Teresa Margolles founded the art collective SEMEFO, an acronym for Servicio Médico Forense (Forensic Medical Service), destined to work with issues and materials from dead bodies and crime scenes directly inspired by a forensic approach. Margolles herself is a qualified forensic technician who worked in the mortuary of the City of Mexico. During the 1990s she created a long series of works based on the matter of death and decomposing bodies, organic materials, blood stains, body remains, and fluids, through the exposure of bloody hospital sheets, blankets used to wrap bodies in the morgue, body prints, masks, and clothes worn by murder victims at their moment of death (*Estúdio de la ropa del cadaver* / Study of the corpse's clothes, 1997). The main objective of these works is not only a critical exposure of the increasing violence and organized drug-related crime in big Mexican cities that victimize less-privileged groups of society, as well as the posthumous condition of the body, often tied up in economical and legal demands that determine the final destiny of the corpse. In 2005, Margolles travelled to the Mexican border and spent time working in the outskirts of the City of Juarez and Chihuahua, exploring the crime scenes of the murders and disappearances of the hundreds of innocent girls and young women that have taken place since the 1990s and have never been clearly explained. Most are victims of sexual violence and many are targeted while crossing the borders or searching for work at the *maquiladores*, assembly factories that

exploit the extremely low wages on the Mexican side of the border. Other circumstances such as drug trafficking, prostitution and the illegal smuggling of immigrants are probably part of the whole picture, but the final result is a massive number of killings with a very low or even inexistent prosecution of the perpetrators. Margolles drove around in her van and often spent the night collecting earth and sand from crime scenes or places where the bodies of sexually abused women were found. Out of this material, she would hand-make adobe bricks that could be exhibited in different ways, as a brick wall, for instance, supposedly containing forensic material. (*Lote Bravo*, 2007) Together with the exhibition of the sand blocks, printed facts on the killings are presented accompanied by a video of a car traveling on the roads in the area where Margolles made her study of the case. What should be noted in Margolles' work is the way she reshapes the material residues related to the crimes - not only for the purpose of explaining the underlying facts and reasons presented simultaneously in the text accompanying the works - but also as different objects interpreting the geopolitical, juridical and economical reasons behind these crimes, while offering her personal material expression of mourning. The handmade blocks of sand and adobe carry the remains of the crimes, but at the same time, they can build a wall and become an allegory for the border issue between the USA and Mexico and, eventually, a site for mourning. In her work *Línea Fronteriza* (Border Line 2005), a series of black-and-white photographs, framing the stitches used to sew a corpse after an autopsy, becomes a human expression of the limit between the living and the dead, a frontier that for many of these victims, chosen from morgues in the Northern states of Mexico, is concretely enacted by the effective political borders. Margolles brings crime and death close to the visitors. It is literally present in her work when she exposes *Pinturas de Sangre* (Blood Painting 2009), a series of canvases dripped in blood. You would not know this if she did not say it, and it is not the shocking repetition of trauma that has her interest. She reminds us of the presence of violence and the proximity of death in the day-to-day life in Mexico, creating a sensible expression that recollects the memory of this brutal reality in its primary materiality (body tissue, fluids, blood). So when Margolles, during the Venice Biennial in 2009, washed the floor of the Mexican pavilion every day in a mixture of blood, remains of murder

victims, and water, it was obviously a provocation, but also a reminder of the silence that surrounds the escalating numbers of violent killings every year and that affects everyone. So the title *What else could we talk about?*, (*De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* 2009) was explained by this ethical urgency. This social and ethical urgency mobilize the artistic intervention and makes explicit the relationship between forensics and the forum. The presentation and articulation of findings are just as important as the discovery of truths and inseparable from them. The forensic aspect stresses the scientific commitment to the material findings and at the same time challenges the existing forums and invites to the creative elaboration of new strategies of presentation in forums between art and science.

Final remarks

The question here is not what today defines a work of art as “Art” rather should it be phrased with the Nelson Goodman’s famous words “When is Art” (Goodman 1978, 56-70). A work or an object can function as art in certain occasions and in others as e.g. a sample in a scientific research. The parallels between the practices of some contemporary artists and the critical challenges to research in the humanities and social sciences are manifest. Both are engaged in an object-focused approach to recent political and social history and stress a common valorization of participative authorship, performative interaction, and explorative and affective engagement. The artists discussed here enhance the expressive possibilities in works that target the material remains of history, and frequently these expressive experiments are conditioned by the links between aesthetics, political, and ethical responsibility. Researchers within the humanities and the social science adapt new technologies to access their fields of research in ways committed from the start to exploration and exposition of results as critically informed and to their rhetorical and aesthetic effects in a forum affected by their subject issue.

It is the impression that the insistence on the ethical issue as the center of aesthetic experience represents today the essential transforming element of the work of art, aiming at the creation of new inter-subjective relations in a context in which it is given as a pure event without representing any occult substance in terms of metaphysical moral values, and without restraining itself to the narrow scope of existential experience.

One might ask whether this choice of artistic responses to the social conditions in contemporary Latin and Central America will actually represent a significant current in future productions. Perhaps we are not talking about a representative set of works from a mainstream perspective. Rather, as I see it, we are looking upon a certain transformation in the ways of conception, production and reception of arts and research, whose importance cannot be measured by an isolated critique of a single work. Perhaps we are dealing with the emergence of different ways of knowledge production and their corresponding forms of visibility, often involving participatory investigation and performative realization, frequently committed to a specific communitarian and institutional context with extended social and educational consequences.

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